

## Artifact

by

Peter J. Atwood

The hover bucked. Davis staggered. The propulsion fans roared. He swore.

He cut power to the fans and looked out the back window of the cabin. The towlines had gone slack and the skimmer tilted, half sunk in the viscous orange lake. "Shit," he said.

Davis had been harvesting for twenty-five years. The lake was too thick for the mollusks to surface in the coldest months, and the summer winds whipped the lake's sludge into a toxic foam, so harvesters like him made the most of the fall and spring.

He pulled his hood over his brow, leaving the mask dangling, tugged his gloves up over his sleeves and stepped out onto the rear deck. The hover floated, its impellers turning the lake into a pale orange ring around its air cushion, opaque like pulled taffy. The sun had tugged itself above the horizon, and the air stung his cheeks and eyes.

The skimmer was a basic design: a floating bin with a grilled front. When open, the grill angled down, forming a ramp that rode the mollusks up into its bin as the hover pulled it across the lake. He fired up the winch. The torque motor whined as it reeled in the skimmer. Something had fouled it badly.

Davis reached out with the gaff-pole to hook the skimmer. The backwash from the impellers blew up between the vessels, catching him in the face with fumes. He stepped down and balanced his way around the skimmer's rim.

The bin was half-full of sludge. He stirred the orange goop with the end of the gaff. Only a few flat mollusks had been collected so far. Then he saw it:

black and round, a fat object, the size of a large buoy, almost submerged. Beads of orange slipped across it, leaving its surface pristine.

#

An hour after turning back, he saw the headland that marked the eastern end of the span. He had closed the grill, and now the skimmer tugged behind the hover like salvage. The propulsion fans thudded in an interference rhythm.

The radio beeped. *Time for the call*, he thought. He grabbed the headset from its hook.

"Thanks for doing the dishes," Reeda said.

"No problem, hon." Davis had started cleaning up in the kitchen at the onset of Reeda's morning sickness. Nowadays, it seemed just as important to continue. "Did you sleep okay?" he asked.

"Oh, you know. How's the lake?"

"I'm coming back early. What are you doing?"

"Laundry's on. I'll need to run the generator."

"Could you have a look at the cold-house?" he said. He had forgotten to check it on his way out that morning. "Its cells probably need changing too."

"Sure, I could use the walk," she said.

"Great," Davis said, uncertain. It was rare for Reeda to want to do something so active these days. "I'll be back early afternoon," he told her.

"See you then." She clicked off.

He checked his heading and adjusted the fans. Ahead, a pack of skaters ran across the glistening orange swells, their long lizard tails leaving a fading mesh on the viscous surface.

#

Davis got his rig onto the wide flats of the shore, a safe distance from the lip of the lake, and deflated the hover's cushions. Behind it, the skimmer was pitched to one side, its back right corner had scored a groove across the packed black sand.

He yanked open the skimmer's chute and stepped back as the sludge drained. He reached in and scooped the ooze along with his gloved hand. When the bin was empty, he climbed up to get a look at the offending object. It sat tilted in a corner and looked like a fat, squashed, oversized child's top. It was unmarked but obviously manufactured.

*Goddam Mirfac*, he thought. *I am going to sue their corporate ass.*

#

"I've navigated my whole life by the tower out of Breimi," Davis had told Rass the night before. "Hell, I know the shape of every headland along this shore."

"It's not about that!" Rass said. "And you know it."

Their conversation had been working toward this since the two friends had sat down with their tea. Rass sighed, and Davis followed his gaze to the sitting room where Reeda leaned over the coffee table, sketching.

"She's designing her dream home," he explained.

Rass said nothing.

Davis' eyes returned to the kitchen, to the cupboards he had painted himself and the unmatched plates draining beside the sink. "She says she still lives in a bachelor's shack."

"Losing the baby hit her hard," Rass said. He had said this often in the last months.

"I know," Davis said, impatience creeping in. "But she won't get over it obsessing over a house that'll never get built!"

Rass cleared his throat, but Reeda made no sign she had heard.

"Toby saw two fliers over the lake last week," Rass said. "They'll be moving up the span next."

The mollusks Rass and Davis harvested were sold for the blue-white ingots of antimony inside, a by-product of their digestion. Last year, the moon's biggest processor had announced plans to mine the bottom of the lake instead of buying from the harvesters. Mirfac's drones were a common sight now, surveying for antimony concentrations deposited on the lake bottom by decaying mollusks.

The harvesters in Breimi all talked about blocking the company, but no one really expected success. A lawyer had advised them to save the logs from their navigation systems. Laying claim to the patch where you harvested might let you sell your stake for an early retirement.

"Look, Rass, everyone knows my patch. Who's going to dispute it? Not anyone from here to Breimi, least of all some shoe-wearing lawyer from Mirfac."

Reeda came up to the table.

"Rass, would you like some meringues?" she offered. She went to the cupboard.

"Sure," Rass said. He looked at Davis.

"Thanks, hon," Davis said. Her short dark hair was growing out. She had always worn it long, and only now was she starting to look the way he remembered. He missed her. He missed the way she used to smile and tell him not to be so loud when he laughed. "Have a cup of tea," he said.

She had laid the plate of sweets between them and shook her head.

#

Davis clambered into the bin and kicked the few flat gray mollusks out of the way. He needed to shift the object to right the skimmer. He squatted with a grunt and reached underneath, laying his hands flat against its underside. A tingling sensation danced across his palms. He pulled away. Spots floated in his vision. "God in hell!"

He looked at it again. It was featureless, smooth, black, but giving no reflection. He touched it. Starbursts danced across his eyes.

He stood again. The lights in his eyes—what had first appeared as fireworks—had resolved into geometries. He lay his palm against the black surface and closed his eyes. Circles, triangles, and rectangles—retinal negatives—ordered themselves, searching according to some logic. A pattern of circles and dots hit on a childish outline of a face: a loop enclosing two bright specks and an oval mouth. The mouth flattened and turned up its corners in a smile.

Startled, he lifted his hand and looked out to the lake. A wind was coming off it, and the horizon was pale gray. A squall was building, summer storm.

He squatted again, his suit pinching behind the knees, and positioned himself, wiggling his back against the metal wall of the bin. Reeda would have warned him against what he was about to do. In one sure motion, he got both hands behind it, leaned in, and shoved.

His whole body buzzed—his hands, his chest, his chin where it pressed the top of the object—a chemical feeling. Lights danced under his eyelids. The

object was far heavier than it had any right to be. With one gasp, he scraped it across the skimmer's bin. The tingling surged up his arms. The moment the skimmer righted, he let go and stepped back, panting.

He could still see the image that had written itself on his eyes. The childish face had gained detail, strings of light joining, curving, searching their way into a clear portrait of Reeda.

#

The wind tugged the steering as Davis drove the four-wheeled runabout across the black sand, the device stretch-cabled into the basket behind his seat. He steered past the long, squat cold-house where he stored his harvests, then turned and headed up the rocky crest that marked the limit of the flats. The runabout struggled, its servos whining until he crested. His home stood in the distance across his half-cleared rock-scrabbled lot.

The tingling reached out to him. He felt it behind his ears as if he were clenching his jaws. His skull itched under the skin. Images visited him. He fought them, like a dream he couldn't put aside. He saw the dials on his hover's dash, the lake's undulating horizon, a clattering of mollusks, their fan shapes tumbling into the cold-house's hopper. It was an inventory of his daily life, sorting the pieces. An intelligence was behind it, voracious, collecting every scrap. He saw Reeda bringing him tea. Reeda sitting in the dark when he went to bed.

He parked the runabout at the house, hurried up the back steps, and released the memory he had been refusing to think, fighting to keep it safe. It was Reeda, exhaustion and joy written in her smile, beaming up at him with Sally in her arms. The saddest and happiest memory of his life. He sealed the door behind him and called Reeda's name.

"I'm in here," she answered.

She was in Sally's room. He couldn't help it. The utility closet opened off the back hall, and he stepped to it in his boots. He slid the plastic door open. Wet clothes were clumped unattended in the washing machine.

In the baby's room, Reeda was sitting beside the empty crib.

"The laundry's not done," he said.

"I'm sorry, hon."

"I guess you didn't do the fuel cells either?"

"Please."

His body filled the doorway, his hands on either jamb. Angry. "Reeda . . ."

"Not here, Davis."

"Where else am I going to tell you? This is where you spend all your time."

"Please, I said." Her voice went quiet.

"I'm fucking tired . . ." he started, and then relented. His hands fell. "Get the laundry into the dryer. I won't do everything."

She brushed her cheek with the back of her hand. Her eyes were red.

"Look. You can have the runabout tomorrow," he said. "Go see your mom. I'm going to set the generators."

#

Davis scrubbed down and changed out of his work clothes. In the utility closet, he switched the cells and started the generator. The laundry sat untouched in the washer. He put on a light suit, stepped out the back door and tightened its seals. The house's filters had blown out last summer, and he hadn't got them running again yet. If the season was over now, he'd have to get to that.

The back of the house faced away from the lake, across the rocky plain. Windblown dust smudged the flat horizon. The runabout was parked where he had left it, next to a pile of prefab sections he had bought last winter for an addition he had yet to build. The black object was still cabled behind the runabout's seat.

There was time before dinner, he decided. He was going to walk out to the cold-house. He descended the steps and followed the runabout's worn tracks around the corner of the house.

#

When he and Reeda had been dating, she had always wanted a stroll after dinner. He had lived in town then, working one of the large harvesters that sailed from the pier. "There's not that much to see in Breimi," he'd tell her. After you walked the main road

and the lake-edge, there wasn't much else. The depot took up most of the shore, and with its cold-houses, hangers, and hovers, it was too industrial to be picturesque.

But Reeda was from Citadel and didn't care. "I like walks," she would say. "And you need to learn what I like." It was kind of a joke.

Whenever anybody asked Davis and Reeda how they met, they always described their second date. On the phone, Davis had joked that he didn't really know her yet, so at the coffee shop, she had pulled out a box of photos. Baby pictures, family holidays, photos from nursing college. "I want you to really know me," she had explained.

He had loved that in her, her fearless openness.

Whenever Davis told the story, Reeda always brought up that the picture he liked best showed her in her high-school uniform. She had played on the slide-ball team, and in the picture her arms were around two teammates in blue shorts and jerseys with large blue numbers. Reeda was number fourteen. "That's the picture he went for straight away," she would tease. "The man cannot resist a girl with a bit of leg."

#

At the cold-house, he checked the seals on the door and climbed to the roof to check the hopper's seals as well. The wind whipped across the flats and burned his nostrils. He climbed down, rotated the cells in the generator, set the timer, and headed back.

Gusts scoured the ground, and the mounds of cleared rock reached toward him with late afternoon shadows.

He found Reeda in the kitchen chopping apples and liver for dinner.

"What's that thing?" she asked. She scraped the peels and end bits into the compacter.

He sat at the table and stretched his feet. "On the runabout? I don't know," he said. "Some kind of Mirfac probe. Tomorrow I need to check how much it damaged the skimmer." A yellow notepad lay on the table. It showed a floor plan, the windows and doors carefully marked, the rooms labeled. One featured French windows opening to a rock garden. It was marked "Sally's Room."

"Did you deal with the laundry?" he asked.

She banged her knife and plate in the sink.

"I'm going to call Rass," Davis said, getting up. "I'll get it out of the runabout in the morning. Best not to touch it."

#

The winds bit viciously. Flecks whisked off the lake, and pellets of foam stung Davis' suit. It was miserable work sorting the skimmer out. One wheel had knifed under and been dragged across the hard mud. He had to take it apart and straighten its hub to get it to roll clean.

Rass had been mystified on the phone the night before. "It's not enough their flyers are scanning the lake," his friend had said. "Now Mirfac's dropping probes to screw up our gear."

Davis had avoided mentioning the visions. They felt like a violation. Wearing gloves had made no difference when he had wrestled the probe from the back of the runabout that morning. A gallery of faces had cascaded before him—Rass, Reeda, his parents and brother, Tam from college, Sally's big hazel eyes—and then somehow, in a single voice, they asked, "You are Davis?"

"No!" He had been surprised by the hollow in his gut, as if he were about to cry. He repeated it in his mind: "No, no, no, no!"

It had seemed lighter. But that wasn't right. It was still obscenely dense, but when he fought to lift it, it had lightened just enough to get over the basket's lip. It dropped and stuck solidly in the ground. He had left it there in the corner by the back steps.

Davis tested the skimmer's wheel, returned his tools to the cold-house, parked the runabout there, and walked back to the hover against the growing wind. The lake was pushing up the flats. A thin, orange tentacle reached into the groove scratched by the skimmer. He winched the skimmer onto the hover's deck, fired up the fans, and drove it up to the cold-house where he closed it down for the season.

When he pulled up at the house in the runabout, Reeda was at the back door, staring at the probe.

"You should leave that alone," he said, unzipping his hood.

Reeda turned and smiled. "It knows me," she said. She kneeled down and rested her hand on the black convex shape.

He moved fast. "Reeda! Don't!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her away. "It's not safe."

"Davis, this can't be from Mirfac. It's something else."

"Doesn't matter. I don't want you touching it."

"It showed me Sally."

"No, Reeda. It's not real. I saw all sorts of things too."

"You don't understand. It's communicating," she said.

"It plays with your mind."

"It . . . it let me talk to her. It said I can visit her."

Davis held her by the shoulders. "Stop it! Stop it! Sally's gone!"

He saw her eyes measuring his cruelty.

"Come inside," he said. He slid his hands down to her wrists. "I'm going to call Rass to help get rid of it."

"No," she said. She shook her hands free.

"It's not right to obsess. It doesn't help. It hurts me to watch you suffer—"

Her whole physical self burst. "Why don't you suffer!" She slammed his chest. "It makes me hate you. You don't cry. It's not fair. You don't cry."

"Reeda . . ." He hated this. They were going to fight. He was going to yell. "Reeda, Reeda!" He breathed. "I cried, you know I cried. You were there. I cried—"

"*I'm suffering!* I'm doing it all!" Her voice broke.

It shocked him—how the anguish inside her was endless. "I am not doing this," he said. "I am not!" He pulled her hands off his chest and went up the steps.

#

In the morning, Davis woke to the alarm clock's intermittent trill. He recalled rolling over and finding Reeda's side of the bed cold. She had come in some time after dark, and he had called out to remind her to seal the doors.

He pulled a T-shirt over his shoulders and walked to the kitchen in his shorts. "Reeda?" he asked.

The room was empty. The kitchen had an outside door that faced the lake. It hung open a crack, and a track of mud led across the floor to the sitting room. "For God's sake," he said.

The baby's room was closed. "How long have you been up, hon?" he asked through the door. "Reeda?" He knocked.

He heard her voice and leaned forward, turning his ear. She was crying. No, it was more coherent than that. Talking.

"Reeda!" he called again. This pushed his patience. He wanted to pound the door open and start yelling.

At the tea maker, he found his pouch from last night and held his mug under the spout. Then he pulled some dishtowels from a bottom drawer. The house was silent except for the wind outside.

Davis got on his knees and started mopping the muddy tracks, working his way from the sitting room to the kitchen door. *She needs help*, he thought. *She needs . . .* he didn't know. He had held her before; he had comforted her once. Those days seemed so far away.

Maybe Rass was right, maybe she needed a doctor. It was so unreasonable—everybody wants to help Reeda because she's not coping, and what help does he get? He gets to crawl on the kitchen floor mopping up dirt. That's what he gets.

He reached the door and pushed the towels up against the metal seal. A foot-wide dent flattened the strips into which fit the door's high-density seal.

"Shit!" He stood and looked back through the kitchen. Reeda had rolled the black object around the house from the back steps to the kitchen door, which was level with the outside. She had pushed it across the threshold, through the kitchen and sitting room, and into the baby's room. He pulled the door shut and turned the seal. It wouldn't go.

He headed back to the baby's room. It must have taken her all night to get the probe in there. "Reeda!" He banged on the bedroom door. There was no answer. "Come on, Reeda." He shook the handle. She had locked it.

#

Davis stood outside in the growing storm. The lake was an angry orange froth, the horizon lost in swirling clouds of gas. The air tasted of burnt plastic. He hadn't bothered to suit up. Time was short.

The kitchen door was off, and he was pulling apart its outside seal, bolt by bolt. He had left Rass a message to come and help and then found a door section in the pile of prefab sheets behind the house. The wind had caught the flat aluminum, pulling his shoulder. He was going to cannibalize it to replace the kitchen door.

He attacked the next bolt, putting his whole weight on the wrench. It didn't move. He picked up the crowbar and swung his anger at the wrench handle. The bolt jerked loose.

His eyes burned and the wind stung the back of his neck. It would leave scars. He pulled on the wrench, and the nut came loose enough to finish with his fingers. He would have to put on his suit if he wanted to continue.

A pale orange foam was spreading into the house, coating the kitchen floor and pebbling the furniture. Where the froth had melted, rivulets gouged veins in the floor.

Wooziness unsteadied him. He looked at the untouched door section behind him, its ring of sharp clean nuts still in place. There was no way he was going to get this door in place before the storm suffocated them both.

He stepped through the wound in the side of his house and hurried to the closed bedroom. The air in the house was heavy, still. Fumes sank past the back of his throat.

"Reeda," he called, but didn't wait for a response. Holding his elbows, he launched his shoulder against the door. And again. The hollow plastic buckled.

Reeda was on her knees. Her shoulders slumped over the slim mattress of the crib. Resting in her curled arms was the black object. Panic choked him. He linked his hands across her chest and pulled her off, dragging her into the sitting room. He fell, sitting behind her.

He breathed. "Reeda, we have to get out. The house isn't safe."

She looked over her shoulder. "Davis? Your face!" He stood, grabbing her wrist, and pulled her up. "Come on."

She looked back to the shape on the crib. Her weight shifted forward, and he pulled her around.

"Let me go," she said. "It knows Sally."

"Sally is dead. She died as a baby."

Her eyes snapped into focus. "No, no. It knows her older. She's talking. She drew a picture of a house and a bunny. She told me she wants a bunny."

"Stop!" Davis yelled. "She was a baby. She died in the crib. You got up to feed her. You got up and she was dead!"

"I know! I know!" She turned calm. "Davis, listen. Don't you want it to be true? It makes things from our memory. It's why it came. It told me it can bring her back. It can take us to her. We can live with her."

"You're not making sense."

"You're not listening. You don't know. You closed yourself to it."

"Of course I did! Listen to yourself."

She looked back at the crib. "Why don't you want her back? She's our baby."

He followed her look. The black shape tilted itself upright.

Davis didn't wait. He dragged Reeda through the kitchen. She stumbled against a chair, and then they were outside.

The wind tore at them. He held his collar over his mouth; his chin burned where it touched. Reeda put her sleeve to her face, burying her nose in the crook of her elbow. His eyes watered. The air was orange. At the limit of visibility, gusts curled over the crest down at the flats. The storm would have pushed the lake right up to the cold-house, but even there, in the teeth of the fury, it was their best refuge. Sealed tight.

They passed the prefab door and Davis found the tracks that led out to the cold-house.

He fell to one knee and retched violently. His throat and lungs hurt. She crouched beside him.

"Shallow breaths," he said.

"We won't make it," she said.

"We have to. We're almost . . . we're halfway there."

He lifted her to her feet, struggling. He stepped forward, but she stayed. “It can help us,” she said. “I believe it. We can live with Sally.”

Davis looked back. Near the house, the storm warped around the squat black cone, which hovered a foot above the ground. The shape moved through the gale like an equal force of nature.

Reeda saw it too. “See. It can take us away.”

“No!” He grabbed her shoulders and turned her into the wind. Her hands went immediately to her face. “Reeda, I need you! You have to get to the cold-house.”

She looked at him. He turned her again. “Go!” he said.

Davis turned back. The whine and scrape of the wind filled his ears. The thing moved toward him, the shape of the storm changing around it. He let the wind throw him forward. His hair was slick and burned his neck and forehead.

The dark solid slowed as he neared it.

He felt it touch his mind. “You are Davis,” it said. The voice cut out the storm. Reeda’s face flashed, just as he had seen it a moment before. Livid and raw, her earlobes half eaten away.

“Leave her alone!” he yelled, and opened his eyes. He didn’t realize he had closed them. It floated inches before his thighs.

It tilted as if to go around. He threw himself onto it. It filled his gut; his shoulders fitted around it. He wrapped his arms under, holding desperately. His face, his hands—he could feel nothing but the dizzying vibrations.

“Leave her,” he said.

Like a burst dam, he remembered it all. Taking Sally into his arms in the hospital. The sweet sour smell of her skin, the wispy hair on her pink scalp. Reeda’s tears of joy. He could still feel Sally’s weight in his arms, and his heart ached. “Take me,” he cried.

A convulsion grabbed. Every sensation froze. Something flowed in his mind, in his head, dripping, winding like a worm, a coursing voltage.

“Reeda,” he gasped. “Go!”

A shock of cold. Like a drain suddenly pulled, everything rushed out. Himself.

#

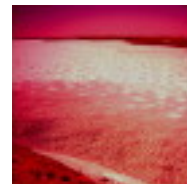
*My wife, Reeda, will tell you I’m a complainer. She thinks I’m stuck in my ways and can’t accept anything new, but my host looks after me, and, honest truth, I don’t complain. I’ve been here . . . I don’t know how long. The house is nice. I like this bright room with the bay window and the rock garden outside. Sally’s crib is here.*

*There’s always a meal if I’m hungry. Tonight it was Reeda’s black stew with apples. We take a stroll in the garden after dinner. They ask me to remember. The more I remember, the happier I can be. Some days she’s pregnant, sometimes her hair is short. She’s young tonight, wearing her uniform—number fourteen.*

*Reeda was good, you know. She kept playing at college. She didn’t go on a scholarship, but she made the team. She was proud of it, you could tell, the way she always perked up when somebody asked her. I tell her I wish—I was going to say, I wished I could have seen her play, but I did, just like in the photo. No, that’s not right, if it was in the photo, I never saw . . .*

*There are things I don’t understand. Everything flickers if I turn my head too quickly. Why don’t I ever see Sally? I hear her voice in the next room, but she’s never there. Sometimes I think I died, but then, there’s Reeda, just the way I remember.*

*The other thing I don’t understand. I miss her. I miss her so much.*



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